

# Putin Says Russia Has 'Nothing to Do' with Belarus-Poland Border Crisis

By [AFP](#)

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Putin said European leaders needed to talk to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko if they want to resolve the crisis. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday denied claims Moscow is helping to orchestrate a crisis that has left hundreds of migrants from the Middle East trapped on the Belarus-Poland border.

Blaming Western policies in the Middle East for the crisis, Putin hit back at claims from Poland and others that Russia is working with Belarus to send migrants to the border of the European Union.

"I want everyone to know. We have nothing to do with it," he said in an interview with state television broadcast Saturday.

Putin said European leaders needed to talk to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to

resolve the crisis and that "as I understand it" German Chancellor Angela Merkel was ready to do so.

"We should not forget where these crises associated with migrants came from... Western countries themselves, including European countries," he said.

The migrants, mainly Kurds, have been stuck for days in a no-man's land on the border in near-freezing temperatures, setting up a tent camp and burning wood to keep warm.

Belarus says there are about 2,000 people in the camp, including pregnant women and children. Poland says there are between 3,000 to 4,000 migrants on the border, with more arriving every day.

## **Tents, heaters brought to camp**

There is growing concern for their plight as temperatures fall, with Poland refusing to allow them to cross and accusing Belarus of preventing them from leaving the area.

Belarusian authorities said Saturday they were delivering aid including tents and heaters to the migrant camp — a move that could make it a semi-permanent presence on the borders of the EU.

State news agency Belta reported that government bodies were erecting tents at the camp and that a generator had been delivered.

Migrants have been trying to cross the border for months, but the crisis came to a head when hundreds made a concerted effort on Monday and were pushed back by Polish border guards.

Sporadic attempts to cross have continued, and Polish police said Saturday that the body of a young Syrian man had been found in a forest close to the border.

Police said the cause of death could not be immediately determined and that a group of around 100 migrants had attempted to cross the border during the night in the area.

The death brings to 11 the number of migrants found dead on both sides since the crisis began in the summer, according to aid groups.

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European leaders have accused Lukashenko, who has ruled ex-Soviet Belarus for nearly 30 years, of luring the migrants to his country to send across the border in revenge for sanctions imposed over a bloody crackdown on his opponents.

The EU is expected next week to widen the penalties to include new sanctions for "human trafficking".

## EU set for new sanctions

European Commission vice president Margaritis Schinas said in an interview in Saturday's edition of French newspaper Le Figaro that the sanctions would be "approved and applied".

He said they would apply among others to Belarusian state airline Belavia, which has been accused of ferrying groups of migrants from Turkey and elsewhere to Minsk.

Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya urged European leaders to reject talks with Lukashenko.

"There can't be any dialogue with the dictator trying to blackmail democratic countries," Tikhanovskaya, who fled Belarus after claiming victory in a disputed presidential election last year, said on Twitter.

The EU said Friday it was having some success in efforts to stem the flow of migrants, after Ankara banned Iraqis, Syrians and Yemenis from flying to Belarus from Turkey.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's top foreign policy adviser told AFP on Saturday that Turkey was also not to blame.

"Travellers are going to Belarus and from there to Lithuania, Poland and other EU countries. Blaming Turkey for that, or Turkish Airlines, is simply so misguided, misplaced," Ibrahim Kalin said.

Tensions remain high at the border, where thousands of troops have been deployed on both sides.

Belarus said Friday it would "respond harshly to any attacks" and held joint drills with Russian paratroopers near the border.

Russia, Lukashenko's main ally, sent planes including strategic bombers to patrol over Belarus this week.

But Moscow's support for Minsk is often cautious, and Putin in the interview said Lukashenko was acting entirely on his own when he threatened this week to cut off Russian gas transit through Belarus to Europe.

"Honestly speaking, it was the first I heard about it," Putin said.

"He never told me, did not even hint. Well, he can probably. But it would not be good and of course I will talk to him about this, if he didn't simply say it out of irritation."

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